

As the culture of aggressive ambition no longer looks like a successful strategy for survival, we must come to terms with the fact that being ‘ordinary’ does not equate to failure.

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*The recession has affected people not only in financial terms but has highlighted psychological problems workers face in trying to achieve extraordinary success. In the third article of her continuing series on public policy, work, and mental health, **Elizabeth Cotton** criticises a work culture that demands fantastic abilities to the detriment of ordinary people.*

The bubble has well and truly burst but this time is a psychic one. The age of **narcissism** and **infantile omnipotence** has been shattered in the current economic crisis, in which previously ‘untouchable’ people have found themselves unemployed. With **UK unemployment figures** hovering around 8 per cent, it seems the culture of aggressive ambition no longer looks like a successful strategy for survival.

Omnipotence has been seen a powerful driver for many successful (and presumably unsuccessful) people. If you are rich/ perfect/ fashionable/ young/ beautiful/ charming (tick at least six boxes) then you are obviously brilliant and therefore valuable. The problem with this logic is what happens if you are not brilliant. That sounds almost like failure doesn't it – admitting that you're not brilliant. Although it is probably not a great interview strategy why is it so hard to admit to being ordinary? Isn't being human enough?

This question touches on the dualistic nature of the bubble that many of us have been living in. You are either fantastic or rubbish and if you're not entirely fantastic then it must mean that you are entirely rubbish. There is no other option currently available; computer says no. This is most graphically represented by the high numbers of senior managers made redundant during this recession. What is actually happening to senior managers no worse in real terms than anyone else made redundant, but the fall is further and therefore it seems harder. I've even caught myself recently feeling sorry for city workers on the Northern Line as they become increasingly dishevelled and demoralised, finding it harder to keep up the sixteen-hour work schedules and total loss of personal life, their ability to relate to small animals and children and to maintain an aura of success at all times, including during family events and public holidays.

This punishing approach to work is not just manic, it's almost bipolar. **Bipolar Disorder** is characterised by a painful movement between a euphoric, grandiose and inflated state of mind to a burst-bubble feeling of depression and extraordinary deflation. This is an immensely painful condition to endure and in many ways resembles the culture that believes only brilliance, success and wild ambition can overcome certain realities. The **MDF Bipolar Organisation** has an important perspective on this, linking highly demanding

work environments like law and finance to bipolar disorder. In a working environment where people feel they are or must be masters of the universe it is not surprising that mental illness goes undetected- rather, it is encouraged. How could you tell the difference between someone struggling with Bipolar Disorder and someone who is running a major multinational company?

This 'brilliant or rubbish' logic can be understood using Melanie Klein's idea of the **paranoid schizoid** stage of early infancy in which the concepts of good and bad are split in order to protect the good bits of life and project the bad bits as far away as possible into the external world. It is a way of coping with the hard facts of life where good things can also be bad things and brilliant things can also be rubbish.

Something similar happens when it comes to mental illness. Most of us at some point have had concerns about our own states of mind and have even asked ourselves, "Am I mad?". This is a common scenario in therapy where a patient turns up asking for a diagnosis, treatment and then the swift removal of madness. This is often linked to the debate about the usefulness of psychiatric diagnostic tools such as the **DSM** as opposed to a more nuanced and possibly more realistic 'spectrum approach' where people can exhibit both pathological and healthy aspects at the same time and at different points throughout their lives. Some therapists witness patients move along this spectrum just within a 50 minute session. They are still the same person, but just exhibiting different aspects of their psychic reality. This way of understanding mental health is crucially important because it is these assessments that, hopefully, determine treatment. Put crudely, when the assessment is mad/not mad, the treatment is akin to surgically removing the mad 'stuff' and leave an entirely healthy organism to grow.

It is also a fantasy that anyone can fully rid themselves of all destructive or damaged aspects of their internal world and become transformed into a totally sane, coherent and healthy person- in other words, perfect. Actually the work of therapy is not to make people better; it is rather to help people know themselves and learn to accept themselves as they really are. It is about being able to be yourself, with all the contradictions, conflict and blatant 'bad attitude' this involves.

This desire for omnipotence is reflected in the idea of superpowers being used in much of children's and **young people's resilience programmes**. The aim of such programmes is to build self confidence in young people so they can manage very difficult realities. In some cases the appeal to power is much needed. But it implies that superpowers are required to face difficult situations and that being human just isn't enough. If the choice really were between being ordinary and having superpowers, the answer seems like a no-brainer, but it rests on a fiction that superpowers are required when actually they don't exist. The reality is that we are all ordinary, in the sense that we all have limits. 'Ordinary' doesn't sound so great, but this is the result of giving yourself a fantasy choice, in which being ordinary means a failure. This means that being human represents a failure.

Being "fantastic" is literally a fantasy and it obscures the very real possibility that being ordinary is being human, and that is quite enough. These obvious facts of life are painful to accept because it hurts to lose our dreams, no matter if they are actually dangerous delusions that stop us from living in the real world. Unattractive as it might seem, the reality is that now the bubble has burst and we have our feet firmly on the ground again. We have lost our superpowers and now have to rely on our ordinary human powers.